

ON THE TRAIL OF BILLY BUDD: AN ANALYSIS OF *BEAU TRAVAIL*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Beau travail (Claire Denis, 1999) is probably the most acclaimed film by French director Claire Denis. The story, based on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*, is set in a French Foreign Legion outpost in Djibouti, which serves as the setting for a peculiar relationship between three men. Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant) is devoted to his commandant, Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor), and enjoys the respect and admiration of the soldiers of his regiment. When a new recruit named Sentaïn (Grégoire Colin) catches Forestier's attention after he takes part in a dangerous rescue operation, Galoup perceives him as a threat, fearing he has become the regiment's new apparent leader.

Denis grafts the widely discussed central motif of jealousy and homoeroticism in Melville's novella onto this plotline, albeit under conditions of narrativity and with a directorial approach that

ensure that *Beau travail* is a completely different work and not merely an expository adaptation. Indeed, its connection to Melville's story is not explicitly stated in the title credits, and the film was rarely promoted as a film version of *Billy Budd*, which had already had several canonical adaptations by the time *Beau travail* was released: Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd* (1951), with libretto by E. M. Forster and Eric Crozier; Robert Chapman and Louis Coxé's play *Billy Budd* (1952); and the film *Billy Budd* (Peter Ustinov, 1962). In contrast with these more conventional hypertexts, the source text is not immediately recognisable in Denis's film, and its relationship with Melville's classic should be understood in terms of a complex trans-semiotising process resulting in what is commonly referred to as a "free adaptation".

For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon of adaptation is understood as an interpretative procedure that can never be reduced to the

FREE ADAPTATIONS ARE NOT EXCEPTIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF ADAPTATION, BUT THE CLEAREST EVIDENCE OF THE INHERENTLY TRANSFORMATIVE QUALITY OF THE ADAPTATION PROCESS

mere transposition of fictional material from one medium to another. In this respect, it is useful to consider François Vanoye's definition of adaptation as a "process of integration, of assimilation of the work (or certain aspects thereof), adapted to the vision, the aesthetic, and the ideology of the context of the adaptation and of the adapters" (qtd. in Pérez Bowie, 2010: 7), or Domingo Sánchez-Mesa's description of it as "a decision-making process involving successive choices" that results in "a cultural text vested with the status of a 'complete and autonomous work'" (Sánchez-Mesa, 2009: 134). Robert Stam also rejects the idea of adaptations as mere copies, viewing them instead as "transfers of creative energy" (Stam, 2005: 46) acting on the original work. Along the same lines, Marie-Claire Ropars suggests that the ultimate aim of the adaptation is not to "transpose or remodel the story, but to enhance the text, outshining it, thereby inscribing the trace of what was written in the original text" (Ropars, 1998: 148-149), while Linda Hutcheon observes that "adapters are first interpreters and then creators" (Hutcheon, 2006: 18), since every adaptation involves the appropriation of the material adapted. Free adaptations are thus not exceptions in the practice of adaptation, but the clearest evidence of the inherently transformative quality of the adaptation process. José Luis Sánchez Noriega has developed a taxonomy that distinguishes between various types of adaptations based on one of the most common criteria for assessing them: the "fidelity/creativity" dialectic. Although I would argue that the idea of fidelity is not valid for a complex study of rewritings, it is hard to overlook this conceptual

opposition in any analysis of the relationship between a work and its hypotext. Quoting Gianfranco Bettetini, Noriega defines free adaptation as a practice "that does not ordinarily operate on the text as a whole—which, in any case, is relegated to the background—but that responds to different interests and acts on different levels: the dramatic framework, onto which a story is rewritten, the ambient atmosphere of the text, the thematic or ideological values, a narrative pretext, etc." (Sánchez Noriega, 2000: 65). My study will explore the extent to which *Beau travail* responds to the transformations listed in this definition, in order to prove that it constitutes a valuable example for studying alternative ways of adapting canonical literary texts. To this end, I will analyse the trans-textual complexity of the film and the network of interferences articulated around Melville's novella, as well as its transfer to filmic discourse in dialogue with other expressive systems, since any understanding of the "film-literature" relationship is meaningful only in the broader context of the relationships established between a plurality of media.

2. CONTEXT OF RECEPTION

In general, it is not common for the recognition of a work as an adaptation to entail an interpretative analysis merely to identify the text on which it is based. With *Beau travail*, the challenge begins with the title itself, which is of course not the same as that of Melville's story, as the titles of the other adaptations mentioned above are. Stam notes that keeping the title of the source text allows adaptations to "take advantage of a pre-existing market" (Stam, 2000: 65) and the cultural capital of the work being adapted. Conversely, the use of a new title suggests a particular transfiguration of certain aspects of the original, such as its ideological stance or narrative perspective and spatio-temporal location.¹ As Catherine Grant (2002: 58) points out in her brilliant article on Denis's film, free

adaptations allow auteurs to reconfigure classic literary texts in their own style and in connection with other intertexts. Sánchez Noriega considers “auteurial genius” to be the main factor behind this type of adaptation, which is not presented as a “visual expression of the fictional tale” (Sánchez Noriega, 2000: 66), but as an autonomous object that transforms the literary source material based on the filmmaker’s own creative consciousness. These kinds of films attract both fans of the director and spectators curious to see the changes that the original has been subjected to in the rewriting process.

THE USE OF A NEW TITLE SUGGESTS A PARTICULAR TRANSFIGURATION OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE ORIGINAL, SUCH AS ITS IDEOLOGICAL STANCE OR NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND SPATIO-TEMPORAL LOCATION

Although the status of *Beau travail* as an adaptation is initially difficult to recognise, it was one of the most widely discussed aspects of the film among critics after its release. Grant’s description of the context of reception can shed some light on this point. Before the film’s screening at the Venice Biennale, there were only two elements that identified an explicit connection with *Billy Budd*: the music listed in the final credits of the film, which includes excerpts from Britten’s opera, and the website of the producer, Pyramid Films, which featured Melville’s poem “The Night March” to promote the film (Grant, 2002: 67).² Otherwise, there is nothing in any paratextual elements that point to Melville’s original story, although the poster clearly depicts the same hostility between the two main characters.

However, as Grant points out, the Biennale festival programs included a new credit that explicitly linked the two texts: “Soggetto dalla nove-

lla *Billy Budd, Sailor* di Herman Melville” (Grant, 2002: 67). This could be considered the moment of a fundamental shift in the promotion of the film as an adaptation. One month after its screening in Venice, the program for the New York Film Festival also included a brief description of *Beau travail* under the title “A note from Claire Denis”, that included two Melville poems headed by the words “Inspired by Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*”.

Grant thus links this explicit reference to the source text to the circulation of the film on the international festival circuit and its promotion outside France. Denis was already a recognised filmmaker in her homeland, and the film’s leading actors were also well known there. Moreover, interest in *Beau travail* had extended beyond the art-house circles of the director’s traditional fan-base, as its story about the French Foreign Legion made it appealing to a wider audience. However, these factors did not prove decisive for the film’s reception in other countries³, where its relationship with a canonical American literary text like *Billy Budd* was deemed of more importance. As a result, despite the substantial changes made to the story, the different title, setting and chronotope, the profusion of intertexts and the film’s formal abstraction, everyone seemed to know that *Beau travail* was an adaptation of the Melville classic.

3. ON THE TRAIL OF BILLY BUDD

Despite the obscure nature of the intertextual relationship between the book and the film, we are given a few hints of the presence of Melville’s story right from the beginning of *Beau travail*. The opening credits are accompanied by an instrumental excerpt from the opera that Benjamin Britten based on *Billy Budd*, but the sound mix and the absence of vocals hinder our ability to make an intuitive connection between this music and the novella. After a series of images that help establish the context with an impressionistic touch—including a sequence shot that pans over

a mural showing the outlines of soldiers, scenes of women dancing in a nightclub, a man yelling “Djibouti, Djibouti” into a phone, and a crowded train racing across a desert landscape—we hear Britten’s music again in a different context. The chorus “O heave! O heave away, heave! O heave!” from Act Two, Scene Three of the opera accompanies the regiment’s morning exercises, which look more like meditation or classical dance than a military drill. Britten’s score is heard again in similar sequences, where Denis suspends any narrative intention in order simply to revel in the male figure and the radical nature of the gestures and movements. It is in these scenes that the music acts more obviously as a “quotation used to evoke another narrative,” which Anahid Kassabian identifies as an example of “allusive music” in film (Kassabian, 2001: 50). The reference does not indicate a relationship of continuity between Britten’s opera and *Beau travail* as far as the story is concerned, given that its function is mainly emphatic, aimed at underscoring the beauty of the male body, which constitutes one of the central motifs of Melville’s novella. It makes sense that Denis would choose Britten’s opera as accompaniment for the soldiers’ solemn, choreographed exercises, as they reflect the attention to male physiques that pervades *Billy Budd*. The director makes use of natural light and the positioning of the human figure in the landscape to highlight the expressive value of the actors’ physicality, in a sculptural depiction of the body that also recalls the story: “Cast in a mold peculiar to the finest physical examples [...], he showed in face that humane look of reposeful good nature which the Greek sculptor in some instances gave to his heroic strong man, Hercules” (Melville, 2012b: 10). *Beau travail* could thus be described as a kind of commentary on or paraphrase of such descriptive moments in the original story, constituting a clear example of “cinema of the body”, in which, to quote Gilles Deleuze, the character must “be reduced to his own bodily attitudes” (Deleuze, 1987: 255).

To this end, the psychological realism of Melville’s characterisation of his characters stands in opposition to a portrait mediated by the concept of “embodiment”, a notion that Erika Fischer-Lichte (2017: 176) uses in the context of theatre studies to designate the way that a character is determined by his or her performative acts that bring out a particular bodily presence. Master-at-arms Claggart’s obsession with the foretopman Billy Budd is thus expressed in the film in bodily terms, as in the encounters between their cinematic versions, Galoup and Sentain, the rivalry between the two men is always reflected in their physical presence. This is the case, for example, of the scene where Galoup provokes the new recruit by demonstrating that he can do faster push-ups, or when the two men circle each other defiantly in another sequence with an operatic solemnity in which Britten’s music again plays a pivotal role. It is specifically in this scene that another constant of Melville’s story is evoked: the confrontation between Claggart and Budd through the gaze. In both the literary text and the film, the dialogues between these two characters are few and far between, as they communicate their rivalry mainly through the looks they exchange—a motif that is also foreshadowed in the film’s promotional poster. In *Billy Budd*, the direct and definitive confrontation between the two sailors doesn’t take place until the nineteenth chapter, near the end of the novella. Until then, the “Handsome Sailor” is only the object of his superior’s spite from a distance: “Yes, and sometimes the melancholy expression would have a soft touch of longing, as if Claggart could

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even have loved Billy [...]. But this was an evanescence, and quickly repented of, as it were, by an immitigable look, pinching and shrivelling the visage into the momentary semblance of a wrinkled walnut” (Melville, 2012b: 47). The importance of the gaze in Melville’s book is also reflected in the construction of the sequence in which Galoup and Sentain are introduced for the first time, on board a motorboat. The camera shows close-ups of the faces, still anonymous, of some of the regiment’s soldiers. The actors have their eyes fixed on some place off screen, and the shots cut quickly to show the faces of the boat’s crew members indistinctly in rapid succession. The last of the recruits to be shown is Sentain, on whom the shot lingers longer after an eloquent camera movement. Immediately thereafter we see a reverse shot of Galoup, the only one of the passengers who is not staring out to space, as his eyes are fixed on Sentain, thereby initiating his relationship of fascination and hatred for the new recruit.

3.1. Changes in focalisation

Right after this scene, we are introduced to the second timeline in the film, where Galoup is in Marseilles, reflecting in a diary on what happened in Djibouti when he was still with the Foreign Legion (we will not discover until the end that Galoup was discharged for his culpability in Sentain’s disappearance, after abandoning him in the desert with a broken compass). From this moment, the film’s location and time frame change constantly, switching between Marseilles, where we hear Galoup’s voice-over while we watch him

carrying out his everyday activities as a civilian in France, and his last days in Djibouti. In any case, despite the difficulty entailed in distinguishing between the two timelines and identifying the supporting characters in these first sequences, the nature of the central triangle is soon made clear, quickly establishing the basic dramatic structure that *Beau travail* takes from *Billy Budd*. In the first fifteen minutes, Galoup explains the jealousy he felt towards Sentain from the day he enlisted, and also recalls his feelings for Commandant Forestier: “Bruno Forestier. I feel so alone when I think of my superior. I respected him a lot. I liked him. My commandant. A rumour dogged him after the Algerian War. He never confided in me. He said he was a man without ideals, a soldier without ambition. I admired him without knowing why.” It is worth recalling at this point how the relationship triangle is structured in Melville’s story. Galoup, Sentain, and Forestier are the film versions of Master-of-arms Claggart, Billy Budd and Captain Vere, respectively. The intrigues between the three, driven by the desire, envy and paranoia of Claggart/Galoup, are very similar in the novella and the film, although the final outcome is different. After Claggart reports Billy to the captain in order to undermine his trust in him, Vere calls both men to his cabin. In reaction to Claggart’s unjust accusations, Billy suddenly knocks down the master-at-arms, who dies when he hits his head. Vere, the sole witness to the accident, organises a summary trial that concludes with the sailor being sentenced to death and hanged from the yard-arm of the H.M.S. Indomitable. The narrator tells how Captain Vere was tormented by the sailor’s execution to his last days, and on his deathbed, after being injured in a battle with a French ship, his last words were “Billy Budd”.

Beau travail also features a confrontation between Claggart/Galoup and Billy/Sentain. The incident occurs after the recruit goes out to help a fellow legionnaire who had been punished harshly by Galoup for abandoning his post in order

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to attend prayer at the mosque. The sergeant responds by striking Sentain, who hits Galoup back, knocking him to the ground in a sequence that uses slow motion to mark a turning point in the story that is also present in the novella. However, Galoup does not die, and in the next scene we see him abandon Sentain to an almost certain death in the desert. The last thing we see of Vere/Forrestier is when he discharges Galoup for his abandonment of Sentain, who is ultimately found and revived by a local tribe. Thus, the character who survives the events to express regret over Billy/Sentain's fate is Galoup himself, and not Vere/Forrestier as in the original story.

This conclusion to the story underpins some of the most important transformations of the narrative in *Beau travail*. First of all, the omniscient narrator in *Billy Budd* is replaced by an internal focalisation from Galoup's point of view, placing him at the centre of the story. The diary and voice-over elements allow the fundamental relationship between guilt and desire so central to the novella to be conveyed in the film, expressed through Galoup's personal reflections. At the same time, the first-person narration has direct repercussions on the truth value of the original story. While Melville's narrator is keen to stress that the events recounted really occurred, even using their reality to justify the uneven development of the story ("The symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact", Melville, 2012b: 85), exactly how much of the story as told by Galoup, plagued by remorse and suicidal thoughts, reflects what actually happened is always ambiguous. In this sense, the codes of verisimilitude that characterise Melville's external narrator could be said to contrast with the potentially falsifiable quality of the time-image in *Beau travail*.

It is worth recalling here that the basic shift that Deleuze identifies in the evolution towards modern cinema is a new understanding of time.

While in the movement-image of classical cinema, time was viewed as a totality depending on the organic whole of sequences resulting from the editing, in "time-image cinema" it becomes a structure of visuality, so that the image is now a representation not only of the object but also of its duration. Although its narration is openly digressive, Melville's novella still conforms to the Aristotelian conception of time structure that Deleuze associates with the movement-image, ordered according to the tripartite division of set-up, confrontation, and resolution. On the other hand, the unreliable narration in Denis's film and the way it lingers on images and sequences that do nothing to further the narrative make *Beau travail* easily identifiable with the features that Deleuze attributes to the new understanding of time in modern cinema. This results in a constant bifurcation of time in the image itself, which ceases to be truthful to become "fundamentally falsifying" instead, as now it is marked by a "power of the false" that proposes the coexistence of not-necessarily true pasts and presents⁴ (Deleuze, 1987: 177-178).

THE CODES OF VERISIMILITUDE THAT CHARACTERISE MELVILLE'S EXTERNAL NARRATOR COULD BE SAID TO CONTRAST WITH THE POTENTIALLY FALSIFIABLE QUALITY OF THE TIME-IMAGE IN *BEAU TRAVAIL*

Nevertheless, Grant (2002: 66) suggests that *Beau travail* may be the adaptation that best transfers Melville's digressive tone and the constant interruptions to the progress of the narrative in *Billy Budd*, as well as its ambiguous rhetoric and connotative power: "In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some by-paths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a by-path. If

the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be" (Melville, 2012b: 16). Denis's film appropriates the preterition and paraphrase of Melville's narrator, who diverges from the story to comment on the historical context of the period, to offer his opinion on certain naval battles, or to share personal anecdotes. The adoption of many of the narrative conventions of art films and essay films in *Beau travail* has a similar effect, as it allows the film to tell its story through "ellipses, redundancies, and a consistent preference for the connotation of potential meanings through the juxtaposition of images and sounds, without always providing a clear, explanatory or causal framework" (Grant, 2002: 65-66). In analogous terms, as Elizabeth Alsop (2014: 16) observes, *Billy Budd* progresses in a constant tension between duty, obligation, and decorum and the threat of their disruption, as becomes clear in the narrator's evasive narration but also in moments in the story like Billy's attacking Claggart and the latter's accidental death ("The next instant, quick as the flame from a cannon discharged at night, his right arm shot out..." [Melville, 2012b: 57]). The duality between desire and discipline in Melville's book is dramatised by Denis through the depiction of the body, evident in the contrast between the rhythmic choreographies of the legionnaires in their exercise routine and Galoup's solitary dance that ends the film. To the sound of the Eurodance classic "The Rhythm of the Night", the character is shown doing a wild, acrobatic dance that continues even after the final credits begin. In this way, the character's use of his body inverts the expected course of events in the final scenes, where Galoup is shown in his bedroom holding a gun in a suicidal pose. Considering these final sequences, Judith Mayne notes that Galoup's body, "whether throbbing slightly in the contemplation of suicide or performing frenetically on the dance floor, cannot escape the dualities of re-

gimentation and desire, duty and passion" (Mayne, 2005: 101). This final scene seems inevitably to evoke Melville's description of Claggart: "though the man's even temper and discreet bearing would seem to intimate a mind peculiarly subject to the law of reason, not the less in his heart he would seem to riot in complete exemption of that law..." (Melville, 2012b: 35). Alsop identifies the opposition between reason and desire not only in the film's bodily attitudes, but also in its narrative construction. Although the narration is focalised through Galoup, *Beau travail* is marked by a series of images that do not seem to belong "to any particular subjectivity or chronology" (Alsop, 2014: 17). An example of this can be found in the scenes where the women of Djibouti⁵ appear going about their daily lives, shopping, travelling or working in the fields, generally engaged in activities very different from those of the legionnaires.

THE DUALITY BETWEEN DESIRE AND DISCIPLINE IN MELVILLE'S BOOK IS DRAMATISED BY DENIS THROUGH THE DEPICTION OF THE BODY

On the other hand, the changes to the narration can also be explained in terms of the intertextual relationship that *Beau travail* maintains with *Le petit soldat* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). The connection with this film has been described by Mayne (2005: 95) as a strategy for constructing meaning that reflects Denis's intention to film Melville's story as if it were a work of the French New Wave. The references to Godard's film begin with the first words spoken by Galoup in a voice-over: "Marseilles, end of February. I have time ahead of me now." This last sentence is the same one spoken by Bruno Forestier at the end of *Le petit soldat*. Forestier, the protagonist in Godard's film (also played by Michel Subor), is appropriated by Denis in *Beau travail* for a strange kind of cros-

sover. In an interview, Denis has explained that she was imagining a future for Godard's character, where "after killing the Algerian FLN agent, Forestier enlisted in the French Foreign Legion" (Lalanne & Larcher, 2000: 51) and rose to the rank of commandant. Subor's character is not the only tribute that *Beau travail* makes to *Le petit soldat*, as the film also uses the same voice-over narrative device employed in Godard's picture (Mayne, 2005: 94).

The change to the context of the story from Melville's original can be explained in this inter-textual relationship, which once again places Forestier on the African continent. This also allows Denis to explore the post-colonial theme that has so interested her, beginning with her first film, *Chocolat* (1988), and continuing right up to more recent pictures like *White Material* (2009).

3.2. The Rhythm of the Night: queer discourse in *Beau travail*

The Royal Navy that serves as the context in *Billy Budd* is replaced in the film with the French Foreign Legion, as it was also still an entirely male environment in the 1990s. As noted above, the motif of homoeroticism has been one of the most widely discussed points of the novella among literary critics. Billy's physical beauty plays a central role in the story, and Claggart's hostility is due basically to his repressed desire for the "Handsome Sailor", as the narrator nicknames him. When the master-at-arms warns Captain Vere that Billy Budd is dangerous, a warning borne of jealousy once again betrays his admiration for the foretopman's beauty ("You have but noted his fair cheek. A man-trap may be under his ruddy-tipped daisies" [Melville, 2012b: 52]). Similarly, the eroticism in Melville's descriptions is impossible to ignore, as the sailor's Apollonian appearance is described as attracting all the men on the H.M.S. Indomitable like "hornets to treacle" (Melville, 2012: 215). *Beau travail* could be considered an openly queer adaptation of *Billy Budd*, where the emphasis on the

soldiers' bodies foregrounds the tension existing in the army between the feelings of camaraderie, solidarity and love between men and the taboo of homosexuality.

Grant (2002: 65) finds it plausible that the triangle should be structured differently in the film in order to reflect the ambiguity that some critics have identified in Claggart's and Vere's motivations in the novella. Galoup's survival and his role in providing the voice-over narration posits a similarity in the portrait of the characters of the master-at-arms and the captain in the hypotext. Although the reader may identify Claggart as the only character attracted to Billy, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests (1990: 109), both Claggart and Vere desire the sailor, even if the rhetoric of the story reveals this in different ways: while the repressed desire of the former could be described as *private*, the attraction felt by the latter, expressed through his authority as ship's captain and the preferential treatment he gives Billy Budd, is legitimised in a *public* context.

On the other hand, one of the most effective ways that Denis's film makes use of the queer potential of the story is its exploration of new forms of representation for eroticism in cinema. In his review of *Beau travail*, Kent Jones celebrates the discovery of a cinema "without a strict sexual orientation" (Jones, 2000: 26), which has abandoned the monolithic nature of the heterosexual couple as a basic element consolidated by the directors of the New Wave. Along these same lines, Elena del Río has studied how Denis's films transgress the ideological structure of the *male gaze* to formulate a new conception of desire and eroticism that bears no relation at all to the binary codes with which they have usually been represented in the medium. Denis's filmmaking displaces the sensuality from the sex scenes and their normative representations towards the filmic language itself, and "onto the unlimited series of perceptions, sensations and affects" that comprise it (Del Río, 2008: 149), injecting eroticism into situations

INSTEAD OF ASSOCIATING SEXUALITY EXCLUSIVELY WITH THE INTERACTION BETWEEN BODIES, THE SPECTATOR IS SEDUCED BY A SHIFT OF ATTENTION TOWARDS PURELY PERFORMATIVE MOMENTS

that are generally not treated as erotic in the vocabulary of classical cinema. In this way, instead of associating sexuality exclusively with the interaction between bodies, in *Beau travail* the spectator is seduced by a shift of attention towards purely performative moments. It is worth noting that Del Río describes Denis's work as seductive not in a metaphorical sense, but in the literal sense of seduction as an "act that leads a person away from proper conduct or duty" (Del Río, 2008: 148). The spectator is thus led away from the usual modes of viewing and the traditional narrative conventions of the film medium to embrace the chance and randomness of a new type of story that moves completely beyond such conventions.

Moreover, the repeated focus on the image of these men's bodies represents a completely subversive feature from a gender perspective if we consider that the film medium has been characterised since its origins by a phobia of the male figure, as Laura Mulvey pointed out in a recent interview for *Sofilm*. Mulvey goes further still and asserts that Hollywood cinema "had a phobia of homosexuality" (qtd. in Leroy & Ganzo, 2020: 84), given that it has rejected the male body insofar as it could be offered as a spectacle or turned into a sexualised image. To compensate for this taboo, the female body was spectacularised to the extreme, always with a cisgender heterosexual male target audience in mind.

Many have argued that *Beau travail* offers an eroticisation of the male body and, therefore, a direct inversion of the patriarchal codes of the medium that effectively subscribes to the same dua-

listic logic that underpins those codes. The reality is more complex, as Denis's gaze is never fetishistic. When asked in an interview about this supposed sexualisation, the director remarked that it was an issue that had concerned her during filming and that she had shared her concerns with the actors. Denis commented that her intention to "de-objectify" the bodies is evident in scenes like the one showing the soldiers' exercise clothes drying on a washing line (in Mayne, 2005: 97), which follows a shot in which some recruits are hanging from ropes during training, functioning as a trope that frees the sequence from any sexual charge.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In a discussion of his film version of Jean Genet's *Querelle* (1982), Rainer Werner Fassbinder, another great *free* adapter, listed the steps for rewriting any literary text. Notable among these were the need for an unequivocal questioning of the source text and its language, the development of an imagination immediately recognisable as unique, and "the abandonment of any futile attempt to 'complete' the literary work" (Fassbinder, 1992: 168-169).

My analysis of *Beau travail* offers evidence that Claire Denis has adopted this approach, as her adaptation of *Billy Budd* frees itself of subsidiary status to constitute a very personal reading of Melville's classic. That reading is not limited to reconstructing the original story under different coordinates, like those adaptations whose inventiveness lies solely in transporting the events and characters of a literary text to a different era and context. Instead, the transformations in Denis's film can be identified in a fruitful interpretative relationship that affects all of its discursive elements. These include the establishment of a complex network of intertextual relationships (linking Melville's novella to the French New Wave and to opera, along with a certain performative or theatrical understanding of the medium), a

narrative structure that engages with the focalisation of Melville's story in formal terms, attention to the male body, and also the expansion of the queer interpretation of *Billy Budd* through a counter-hegemonic discourse that questions the gender conventions that have characterised the institutionalisation of the film medium. ■

NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Alsop recognises such changes as characteristic of the type of adaptation examined in this study. By abandoning some of the more common narrative features of rewritings, such as the use of the same title, character names, and sequence of events as the original work, Denis challenges spectators who are "more accustomed to spotting disparity than detecting equivalence" (Alsop, 2014: 16) when watching an adaptation. In this way, it is up to the spectators to detect the connections that will enable them to reconstruct the intertextual relationship between the two texts—connections that are made explicit from the outset in more conventional adaptations.
- 2 Grant highlights the fact that another French art film released that same year was also an adaptation of one of Melville's stories: *Pola X* (1999), Léos Carax's interpretation of the novel *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*. Carax's film won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, and it is possible that the promoters of *Beau travail* chose not to define Denis's film as another Melville adaptation to avoid it being overshadowed by Carax, who at the time had a higher profile than Denis both in France and internationally (Grant, 2002: 68).
- 3 The international press also made a particular point of highlighting how unprecedented it was for a woman filmmaker to direct a film focusing on the male world and set in a post-colonial context. In this respect, right from the beginning the production of the film was surrounded by controversy and all kinds of rumours that Denis was making "a film criticising the French army, a porno flick about legionnaires and Ethiopian girls, or a movie about homosexuality in the Foreign Legion" (Renouard & Wajeman, 2001: 5).

- 4 The subjective nature of Galoup's narration is suggested at the beginning through the editing: a close-up of the water of the sea in Djibouti gradually changes to the diary in which the character is writing, in a cross-fade that briefly holds the double exposure of both images on the screen. In this way, the synthetic appearance of the fade establishes a continuity between the scenes in Djibouti and Galoup's diary entries.
- 5 Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that one of the best qualities of *Beau travail* as a feminist film is the way it uses African women as witnesses to the action, imposing an ironic frame around the story in the form of "a kind of mainly mute Greek chorus" (Rosenbaum, 2000).

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ON THE TRAIL OF BILLY BUDD: AN ANALYSIS OF BEAU TRAVAIL

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of Claire Denis's film *Beau travail* (1999) as a free adaptation of Herman Melville's classic *Billy Budd*. A comparative perspective is adopted to identify the specific transformations in the rewriting process, with attention to changes in focalisation and plot, as well as the film's potential as a queer adaptation of Melville's novella. Central to these relationships is the use of bodies, which creates a narrative that challenges both our expectations of a literary adaptation and the gender conventions of the film medium. In this way, the study finds that *Beau travail* is a benchmark case for defining transformative potential of adaptations.

Key words

Adaptation; Claire Denis; Melville; Rewriting; Performativity; Queer; Cinema of the Body.

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TRAS LAS HUELLAS DE BILLY BUDD: UN ANÁLISIS DE BUEN TRABAJO

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda el estudio de la película de Claire Denis *Buen trabajo* (*Beau travail*, 1999) como una adaptación libre del clásico de Herman Melville *Billy Budd*. Para ello, adoptamos una perspectiva comparatista que permite advertir las transformaciones concretas del proceso de reescritura, atendiendo a los cambios en la focalización y la fábula, así como a su potencial como adaptación *queer* de la novela corta de Melville. En el centro de estas relaciones está la preponderancia del cuerpo, responsable de una narrativa que desafía tanto el horizonte de expectativas sobre las adaptaciones literarias como las convenciones de género del medio fílmico. En última instancia, comprobamos que *Buen trabajo* es un caso referencial para definir la práctica de la adaptación en su naturaleza transformadora.

Palabras clave

Adaptación; Claire Denis; Melville; reescritura; performatividad; *queer*; cine del cuerpo.

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